

Mental-health bill would help families before crisis strikes

By Dottie Pacharis, Guest Columnist
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At age 27, my son's life and the lives of his family changed forever. He was transformed into a different person. His behavior became weird, psychotic and delusional. He was obsessed with neurotic religious beliefs: He thought that God had anointed him a prophet and commissioned him to write another book for the Bible.

He believed he was in the witness-protection program, and federal agents were trying to assassinate him because he was in possession of top-secret information that would take down important people in the government if he went public. He developed an unhealthy fixation for the president and made many attempts to get into the White House. He thought he had a top-secret White House security clearance, and that the FBI had issued him a special gun permit.

There were days he actually believed he was the president, living in the White House. He was in complete denial that anything was wrong with him. It took the assault of a police officer to get him committed to a hospital where he was diagnosed with bipolar disorder.

My son was so ill my family feared he would never recover. But recover he did after 32 days of treatment with forced medications. He suffered four additional, prolonged bipolar-manic episodes, each episode preceded by his decision to stop taking his medication. Each episode more severe than the previous and of a longer duration. The longer duration was because of judges at commitment hearings who ruled time and time again that my son was not a danger to himself or others — oftentimes against the recommendation of the treating psychiatrist.

These judges were complying with state laws that set strict controls regarding hospitalization with forced treatment, restricting it to circumstances when a person is suicidal or homicidal. These laws force families to watch their loved ones deteriorate mentally until they reach the crisis stage and meet the commitment criteria of being a danger to themselves or others. By that time, it is sometimes too late.

Each time my son was allowed to go untreated for long periods of time, he sustained further brain damage. His downward course was aided by an ineffective legal system that continually protected his civil right to refuse treatment until he became suicidal or homicidal. This illness left him trapped in a body ravaged by irreversible damage from untreated bipolar disorder. Sadly, he was allowed to reach the crisis stage one time too many. His third attempt at suicide was successful.

Following the Newtown, Conn., shootings, Rep. Tim Murphy (R-Pa.), a clinical psychologist by training, raised awareness of the need to fix our broken mental-health system and led the charge on Capitol Hill for reform. He spent a year reviewing federal mental-health policies and last December introduced the Helping Families in Mental Health Crisis Act, H.R. 3717.

This bill emerged from a series of hearings on mental-illness-treatment issues before the House Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, which Murphy chairs. These hearings, according to Murphy, "revealed that the approach by the federal government to mental health is a chaotic patchwork of antiquated programs and ineffective policies across numerous agencies."

Families for decades have had to work within the constraints of our broken, dysfunctional mental-health system that fails the sickest — those people who need treatment the most, but are too sick to recognize their illness, and refuse treatment. This bill addresses the obstacles families face when trying to save loved ones from untreated serious mental illness. It would expand access to treatment for individuals who miss out on mental-health services because they are too ill to seek them.

Serious psychiatric disorders, such as bipolar, schizophrenia and severe depression, require medical intervention. They are treatable. They do not have to result in suicide or mass shootings. Helping Families in Mental Health Crisis is the most comprehensive mental-health-reform legislation to be introduced in 51 years. It will lead to treatment before tragedy.

Had H.R. 3717 been law during my son's 13-year struggle with severe bipolar disorder, his family would have been able to help him get treatment. He might very well be alive today.

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